

It's my Pesach, and I'll stress *if I want to*.

Some of you may be aware of a book by Minneapolis North Side native Joel Ziff, a psychotherapist now practicing in Massachusetts, called *Mirrors in Time*. In this fascinating tome, Dr. Ziff outlines a psycho-spiritual approach to the Jewish year which begins with infancy at Pesach, growing self-awareness and at times painful maturation during the Three Weeks in summer, self-reckoning and budding maturity during the High Holydays of late summer, and enjoying the fruits of our personal labors starting at Sukkot and continuing through Hanukkah and Purim. In fact, by the time Purim rolls around, we are such fully self-actualized adults that in Megillat Esther, we're called by our adult name, *Yehudim*--Jews--the *only time* that word appears in Tanakh.

Furthermore, as manifestation of the fact that by Purim we're "all grown up," that the parent no longer needs to be around all the time, in all of Megillat Esther HaKadosh Baruch Hu is never named overtly--again, something unique in Tanakh.

Unfortunately, adulthood isn't all it's cracked up to be. For Jews this realization happens the morning after partying as much as we want to, when we wake up with not just a crushing, post-Purim hangover, but with the awful realization that we only have *one month* in which to clean the house for Pesach. And *boom*--just like that, we quickly regress from confident, independent adults back to helpless infants. If at Purim it's all fun, carefree, partying like it's 1999, the preparations that start the next day are anything but fun, anything but carefree--they completely consume our lives.

In the weeks leading up to Passover, everything's out of our control. Cleaning trumps all. And not just cleaning. To stick it to us extra good, HaShem conspires with the Internal Revenue Service to create the tax deadline. April--or

this year, March--truly is the cruellest month! This year at the Kats household, there's also the bathroom redo which was supposed to be finished March 1 (hah!). And then just this last Tuesday I was notified that the orchestra teacher at Park High, who was due to take her maternity leave in mid-April, was going on bed rest immediately, and I had to start covering for her the very next day, meaning I was losing two days of cleaning. Just what I needed. Not that I mind the employment, but it was one of those moments when you're already beyond stressed, and you can't quite believe that yet one more stressor has now been thrown your way. Well, it could always have been even worse, like if I'd had to prepare a *D'var Torah* for Pesach...

Let's look a little more at this whole idea of us being helpless babies. Prior to G-d delivering the Children of Israel from bondage, they are in Egypt, or as we call it in Hebrew, Mitzrayim. Mitzrayim translates as something like "confines" or "narrow." What an appropriate name. Not only was it a place of enslavement for B'nei Israel, but ancient Egypt was in fact an extremely narrow country. You had to live near the river in order to survive--nearly everything else was inhospitable desert. So Mitzrayim was truly narrow, "tzar," a civilization which extended north and south for hundreds of miles, but which was hardly wider than the Nile river which sustained it.

Like the tight confines of a mother's womb, Mitzrayim provided the Jews a very basic sustenance, but denied them the ability to realize their own potential, so that, just like a baby, they could stay there for only so long. Both before and after their delivery, everything was handled by G-d-the-parent: the Ten Plagues, the Exodus (Sh'mot 12:51: *It happened on that very day: HASHEM took the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt, in their legions*), the Parting of the Sea, food and water in the Wilderness, etc.

At the first Pesach we were helpless babies, dependent on our Creator both to emerge from bondage *and* to survive in the wilderness afterwards. We

controlled nothing. Today, nothing has changed; we're *still* helpless. The cleaning and other preparations for Passover have wholly consumed our lives. For weeks we've been telling our spouses, "no time for a movie--we've got to clean!" For weeks we've been agonizingly sleep-deprived because we have to work all day, and then cook half the night. We don't have time for anything. So it is especially ironic that the holiday of Passover, when ancient Israel's every move is directed by G-d, and when modern Jewry's every move is dictated by Pesach preparations, when nothing is in our control--it's especially ironic that *now* is called *z'man heruteynu*--"the time of our freedom." Are you *kidding* me?!

How could this be the time of our freedom? Well, let's examine people who have completely lost control of their physical lives, who've suffered the worst kind of temporal *metzarim*, yet not let their *minds* be imprisoned. The Austro-Jewish psychotherapist and author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl, came to a profound realization while interned in the Nazis' camps. Though the Germans could imprison him bodily, they could never control him psychologically. Frankl kept up his physical strength through non-physical means, infusing his horribly confined life with ethics and meaning. He devoted himself to giving encouragement to his fellow prisoners, to seeing the beauty in nature while on forced marches in the freezing cold, to making moral decisions in the immoral environment of the camps, to surrendering himself to the love he felt for his absent wife. He related of his time in hell, "Sensitive people who were used to a rich intellectual life may have suffered much pain (they were often of a delicate constitution), but the damage to their inner selves was less. They were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom."

Now, please don't misunderstand me. In no way am I equating the challenges of Pesach prep with the miseries that Frankl and so many endured. What I am saying is that if he found a psychological freedom in such horrific circumstances, we can free our minds in our current situation. Upon

despairingly realizing, once again, that there's yet one more item in the house that needs to be cleaned, we are capable of reminding ourselves that this too shall pass. The cooking and cleaning *will* come to an end, and we *will* be able to rest during the *chag*. Just as Frankl was able to imagine life post-war, we can imagine life post-Pesach-prep. And it's *OK* if the house isn't clean on a Martha Stewart level, just on a kosher-for-Pesach level. It's *OK* if the *seder* meal isn't good enough for *Iron Chef*. What's important is that we're able to sit back and recount the story of our deliverance, and share a bite with loved ones.

The only difference between chametz and matzah is the time span involved in their preparation. Even in terms of spelling, they're quite close. Both have a *mem* and a *tzaddi*. A short bit of one tiny line is all that distinguishes the third letter, the *chet* of chametz, from the *hey* of matzah. At Pesach, we shun not just literal chametz, but also the inflated ego which chametz represents in Jewish tradition, and reconnect with the inflated ego's very close, yet oh-so-different cousin, the well-directed ego, the ego which focuses on productive thought and ethical behavior. It's a tiny, yet enormous mental switch. When we are able to redirect our minds, to stop fretting over things which aren't really all that important, when we acknowledge and trust that somehow we *will* make it through the Pesach prep and *d'var Torah* prep, when we see that our Creator, and how He wants us to live our lives within this world, are what it's all about--not whether the *seder* guests will notice that dust bunny in the corner--that's when we release *ourselves* from bondage--that's the moment of our freedom. It's a freedom which requires continual vigilance to sustain. And it is a vigilance which, if I might say, the congregants of Darchei No'am will have to exercise in the yet-to-be-seen challenges they'll experience when they journey forth from the narrow confines of this room to the promised land at Joppa and Minnetonka, and also in interacting with the long-established inhabitants of the land just across the street.

May each of us continually find renewed success in focusing on what really

matters in life, and in experiencing the *freedom* which that approach to life gives us. And in striving to *allow* ourselves that freedom, to *reach* that freedom, may we all experience this holiday in a way which is truly fitting and truly happy. *Chag heruteynu kasher ve-same'ach.*